

- Hall to Chair House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee Field Hearing in New Windsor, NY -

Washington, DC – Four veterans from New York's Hudson Valley, including Marine Sergeant Eddie Ryan, will get the chance on October 9th to tell Congress about their personal experiences as wounded soldiers struggling to receive the help they were owed by the Veterans Administration. U.S. Rep. John Hall (D-NY19), Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, will bring his House Subcommittee to the New Windsor Town Hall for a special field hearing titled "The Personal Costs of the Claims Backlog," on Tuesday, October 9th at 9:30 a.m. The New Windsor Town Hall is located at 555 Union Avenue in New Windsor.

"Too many veterans who have served in combat and suffered terrible injuries have been neglected by the Veterans Administration when they came home and applied for the pensions and medical help they have earned," said Hall. "It's time for Congress to understand the personal costs of the unconscionably long delays that some veterans endure."

The four veterans who will testify have a shared experience: frustration with long delays on their disability claims from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The first witness, Sergeant Eddie Ryan from Ellenville, NY, was shot twice in the head in 2005 while on his second combat tour in Iraq as a Marine sniper. Sergeant Ryan has had a long and difficult road to recovery. Renovations costing approximately \$100,000 had to be made to his family's house to accommodate his wheelchair. After the VA determined that Ryan was only eligible for \$10,000 in reimbursement for the renovations because the house was owned by his parents, the family transferred the house to Ryan so they could ultimately receive \$50,000. The VA has recently cut back on care for Ryan, deciding that he has reached a plateau in his treatment. Ryan receives speech and occupational therapy, among other rehabilitation services, five times a week. The VA wants to reduce it to two or three times a week. Ryan's family has appealed this decision, which the VA is now considering.

The three other veterans to testify are Alex Lazos from Harriman, Ted Wolf from Pomona, and Eddie Senior from West Harrison.

Alex Lazos was deployed to Iraq in 2003. He experienced heavy combat and witnessed terrible injuries and deaths. After being honorably discharged and returning home, he suffered severe emotional distress and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Lazos first submitted his VA disability claim in August 2005. Despite his medical problems, he was originally rated as zero percent disabled, which meant he was entitled to no benefits. He began the appeals process only to experience delays. Hall's office helped him get a new evaluation from the VA, which resulted in his disability rating being raised from zero to 100 percent. Lazos can now enroll in a VA vocational program and continues to get VA therapy. In addition, he received a check for \$24,000 in back benefits due to him, and a monthly pension of over \$2,400 for as long as he is 100 percent disabled.

Hall's office intervened in the case of Vietnam veteran Ted Wolf in January. Wolf was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2002 from exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam

War. His case was backlogged for 18 months until Hall's office pushed his case with the VA. As a result of Hall's intervention, Wolf now receives monthly compensation that is five times more than he received previously, and he was awarded a check for more than \$17,000 for the benefits that had accrued while his claim was backlogged.

Eddie Senior, a cancer survivor and disabled veteran from Desert Storm, was diagnosed in 1995 with thyroid cancer, Gulf War Syndrome, and psychological and physical impairment that prevent him from working. Despite such severe illness, Senior was receiving only modest payments from the VA. Hall's office helped him to obtain a 60% disability service-connected rating this year from the VA, drastically improving the benefits Senior receives.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has a backlog of nearly 600,000 cases and nationally it currently takes an average of 177 days for a veteran to receive a decision on his or her case. These cases are all claims pending an initial decision by the VA. The overwhelming majority of these claims are from veterans who are seeking benefits from the government that they have earned because of a service-connected injury. Veterans are required to submit a claim based on the nature of the injuries related to their military service. Decisions by the VA affect the monthly stipend a veteran may receive, and his or her eligibility and priority status for VA health care.

The four witnesses will present testimony showing the impact the extended waits caused by the backlog have had on their personal lives and financial well-being.

"The men and women who serve our country deserve to have legitimate disability claims treated with dignity and speed," said Hall. "I'm bringing members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee to the Hudson Valley so they can see and hear firsthand the personal impact that this claims backlog has had on these veterans."

New York's veterans face a claims backlog that is even higher than the national average. Hall is hosting this field hearing to provide Congress with an important opportunity to take notice of the needs and concerns of Hudson Valley veterans.

House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner (CA-51) and U.S. Rep. Tim Walz (MN-1), a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and the highest ranking enlisted soldier ever to serve in Congress, are among the Members of Congress who will be participating in Hall's field hearing.